

# From the graphic designer as author to the reader as designer and author in the age of internet.

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## ABSTRACT

Graphic design authorship has been a frequent subject of discussion and debate in academic and design circles during the last 20 years. The notion of the graphic designer as an author suggests that the designer is not just an intermediary between clients and an audience but her creative scope spreads to the generation of ideas and artifacts. This shift has been promoted by art and design academic institutions and journals. The designer as artist, the celebrity designer, the designer author are common expressions of the aforementioned shift of the designer during the 90s and 00s. In the meanwhile certain developments in digital media and technologies have caused an opposite effect on the status of today's graphic designers; in many cases there is a diminishing need for professional design authorship on territories where in the past a designer would be present and central. Digital graphics tools are available to any person with a home computer and easy to use for projects that in older times would require the skill of a designer. Web developers and internet users with basic html knowledge design web pages, and deploy aesthetic or typographic decisions. Web2.0 websites become more interactive and allow users to change the look and content of web pages within seconds. In the following text I will examine the level and quality of transformation of visual communication within today's digital landscape and investigate to what extent the participatory nature of internet has been for the benefit of the users of the new media.

## ON GRAPHIC DESIGN AUTHORSHIP

Questioning the role of graphic designers and visual communicators is nothing new within the profession's realm. In 1996 (Karel Martens: Printed matter) Robin Kinross observed: ***"The place of the designer is a shifting, problematic one. Around 1960 a consensus view saw him as a useful intermediary between client and public – a man in the middle. Now at the time of writing, the 'designer as useful intermediary' is discredited in avant-garde circles. The talk is again of the designer as author: creating and decisively altering content, and working once again as a quasi-artist."*** The triptych client/designer/audience is fundamental by graphic design definition. They coexist and shape the final design piece. The client initiates the project-problem, the designer solves the problem and the audience receives the final outcome of the design process. Therefore, the idea of graphic authorship can be considered a paradox or at least a challenge to the broadly accepted function of a graphic designer ***"Authorship may suggest new approaches to the issue of the design process in a profession traditionally associated more with the communication rather than the origination of messages."*** (Michael Rock, eye magazine, issue 20, 1996)

During the 90s this new challenging (provocative to some) idea of design authorship was mainly caused by a series of events that occurred simultaneously. Design education in USA and UK during the 80s had started promoting a more creative approach to design education where the boundaries between art and design were almost vanishing (for instance Cranbrook Academy in the USA and Central Saint Martins in the UK). The Cranbrook Academy of Art graduate program introduced a more experimental and innovative approach to design education. Promoting freedom of creative expression, individuality and interdisciplinary engagement in the student projects. But the most significant, to my view, contribution to design education was the blend of practice and postmodernist theory. Post-structuralism,

deconstruction, semiotics and literary theory where seminal sources on the radical stance on modernist design tradition that shaped a new school of thought in graphic design which was already evident in punk or psychedelic graphics during the 60s and 70s but lacked the academic theoretical framework. A more obvious example of academic institutions' contribution to graphic authorship is the MFA Designer as Author which started by Steven Heller in 1997. ***The "MFA Designer As Author" is predicated on the growing need for content providers throughout the visual media. ...this program is the first designed exclusively to encourage authorship and entrepreneurship in a broad range of media.***

(<http://design.sva.edu/site/home>)

Katherine McCoy who was co-chair of the graduate Design program for Cranbrook Academy of Art wrote (in her essay "American Graphic Design expression: The evolution of American Typography"): ***"Graphic designers have become dissatisfied with obedient delivery of the client's message. Influenced by recent fine art, many are taking the role of interpreter a giant step beyond the problem solving tradition by authoring additional content and a self conscious critique to the message, reviving roles associated with both art and literature"***(Steven Heller, Georgette Balance – Graphic Design History, 2001)

A new generation of designers followed up weaponed with more confidence and artistic attitude. In many cases the dichotomy of designer artist was hardly evident. This new status quo of designers is nowadays nothing unusual. Rick Poynor argues and questions in his article for Print Magazine "Observer: We need more galleries that exhibit graphic design" (PrintMag.com, April 2010) ***"Graphic design, someone will say, just doesn't work in a gallery. It isn't art and it can't possibly be properly understood out of context. It only has meaning out in the world in the places where it was intended to communicate...This objection has always seemed misguided to me."*** To strengthen his point Poynor presents some examples of exhibitions where designers are comfortably showing work along artists in Galleries like Warren Taylor curated exhibitions at the Narrows in Melbourne: ***"To encourage cross-fertilization between disciplines, he brings designers and artists together into collaborations, and he shows art and graphic design on equal terms. Graphic design subjects presented at The Narrows since it opened in 2006 have included the artist/designer Ed Fella, American type designer Tobias Frere-Jones, the Dutch studio Experimental Jetset, and posters announcing exhibitions at the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich."***

Adrian Shaughnessy introduced a different but equally interesting perspective to the notion of graphic authorship on his Article Graphic Editorship for online magazine/blog The Design Observer (2007) ***"There's something in the harsh ecology of contemporary graphic design that is encouraging certain sorts of designers to use their skills, instincts and sensibilities to create alternative ways of earning a living. One of the most interesting examples of this is the publishing venture set up by the British design group Fuel."*** <http://observatory.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=6277> Designer initiated publications is nowadays common and the list of design studios that we could bring as an example is very long. They have a status of designer-auteur and in many cases their profile is close to that of a celebrity. Ed Fella (U.S.), Experimental Jetset (Holland), Metahaven (Holland), Neville Brody (U.K.), Danielle Eatock (U.K.), and many more, have become household names of the graphic design industry. Younger graphic designers nowadays graduate from design colleges with the expectation that their future profession can give them a status of creative freedom and authority which has no parallel to the past. A status far more complex and elevated to the one that is described by the client-designer-audience model.

## WHAT IS AN AUTHOR?

I analyzed the concept of graphic designer as an author but I would like to define what is an author and bring the term to a more specific and theoretical context. In particular It is significant to study the author from the perspective of postmodernist philosophies since they were pivotal to the development of graphic design from the 80s and onwards. These theories are also significant in understanding what is a reader or the audience of a designed message or the user of the new digital media – concepts that I will examine in the next section of my essay.

To further define the notion of author I will briefly introduce the work on the subject based on the texts of three French philosophers: Jacques Derrida's writings on deconstruction (introduced in his 1967 book "of Grammatology"), Ronald Barthes' 1968 essay "The death of the author" and Michel Foucault's 1969 text "What is a reader". These texts share the view that the meaning a reader is making when reading a text is in a way disconnected from the intentions of its author. Different readers will interpret the text differently depending on each of their own experiences, gender, ethnic background, etc. The message intended by the author is somehow irrelevant and powerless. As Foucault wrote, a text has its own life independent of its creator. Or according to Derrida's deconstruction theory, a text has multiple complex meanings. Barthes took these views a step further claiming that **'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author'**.

Bringing back our focus on our initial discussion on graphic authorship, we can draw two conflicting conclusions. Firstly the effect of post-structuralism "killed" the author and brought a more responsible and less passive reader. On the other hand it helped in the promotion of the graphic designer as an author. No matter the way a page is arranged and regardless the intention of the designer to carry a visual message, the audience (reader) would interpret the message in her own personal way. But this also liberated the designer from the tyranny of the message and functionalism. This schizophrenic view of visual communication might seem extreme specially when we think of traditional printed media of graphic design. But as we advance to the age of internet and new digital media the advent of an elevated reader-user-audience is becoming more obvious. I will argue this in the following section.

## THE BIRTH OF THE INTERNET USER –DESIGN UNDER THREAT?

I have been using the term 'reader', 'user', 'audience' without great distinction so far to define the people who use the created text, artifacts or environments by designers or authors. In the triptych client-designer-audience these are the receivers of messages or aesthetic decisions. Traditionally they can be seen as passive receivers. The postmodernist theories freed this audience in a certain degree from this passive status and gave them credit in the process of generating meaning. Even in traditional printed media where reading is more linear and the interaction with the pages is very basic there is still work for the reader to be done; deciphering the meaning of texts according to her personal experiences and knowledge.

New media and the internet introduced more complex ways of reading and using these media. In that way the designers (or engineers) of these media lost more of the control upon the way meaning or use would be made by users. There are different ways that we observe this new model of communication

between designers and audiences. I am going to display these new ways and briefly explain the effect on the designer and user/reader.

### **Hypertexts**

Text we read on internet and the various electronic media is (most of the times) hypertext. Everyone is familiar with HTML (acronym for Hyper Text Markup Language) web sites. This mark up language allows browsers to display web pages and feature text, images, sound and video in the familiar way seen in the millions of online websites. Texts are joined together through electronic links. According to Landow's definition (George Landow, Hypertext 3.0, 2006) **"Hypertext, extends the notion of the text in hypertext by including visual information , sound, animation and other forms of data. Since hypertext, which links one passage of verbal discourse to images, maps, diagrams, and sound as easily as to another verbal passage, expands the notion of text beyond the solely verbal, I do not distinguish between hypertext and hypermedia."**

This new way of displaying text and other media has introduced a set of new ways of reading that were impossible with books, newspapers, and other printed media. Hypertexts leave more space for interaction while reading. Firstly, the reader can adjust the font size or change typeface. These decisions are traditionally part of the typographic design of a text for which graphic designers are responsible. Secondly, it is possible to reduce the size of the browser's window and place it next to an email client window or next to a text editing software for typing notes while reading the text. And then there are the links that can break the sequence and linearity (existent in page after page traditional reading)

***"A hypertext version of a note differs from that in a printed book in several ways. First, it links directly to the reference symbol and does not reside in some sequentially numbered list at the rear of the main text. Second, once opened and either superimposed on the main text or placed alongside it, it appears as an independent, if connected, document in its own right and not as some sort of subsidiary, supporting, possibly parasitic text...The multiplicity of hypertext, which appears in multiple links to individual blocks of text, calls for an active reader."*** (Landow) Therefore, the graphic designer's job of fine tuning the typographic elements on a page for creating a legible piece of reading needs to be reexamined in the case of online displayed text. The designer loses much of her control over the layout but the reader gains more control over the ways she can read and interact with the text. Barthes' point on the birth of the reader becomes more relevant within hypertexts.

### **Web2.0 and user interactivity**

The development of web2.0 created a more powerful internet. From static linked pages the web got upgraded, featuring applications, before only available as software running on the hard disks of personal computers. Web 2.0 increased the level of user interactivity. Social network websites, wikis, blogs, online applications (from text editors to graphics and music tools) all invite users to participate and manipulate the content of internet. Websites like Myspace allow users to "design" their personal pages, change backgrounds, colours etc. Template websites are cheaply available to anyone who wants to have a website without contacting a graphic designer or a web developer. The user can choose from a plethora of pre-designed/developed website layouts and adjust them to her aesthetic preferences. Very recently Facebook offered a new and alternative interface for its users who are now free to choose between two very different ways of displaying their personal pages.

We can argue that the progress to web2.0 have reduced the status of graphic designers. Their involvement into shaping the look and functionality of these new media has been reduced. The advent of screen based media seem to jeopardize the dominance or even the existence of printed forms of

communication and given the advent of user generated content and design the graphic designers' participation can be considered superfluous. But is this the case?

#### A NEW ELEVATED STATUS FOR THE DESIGNER?

So here there is the well celebrated graphic designer author in a new, digital dominated landscape, where her audience can ignore the role of designers in forming the new visual landscape by simply taking advantage of the new tools and interactive media available for her online. Graphic design is not the complicated craft that required the skill and knowledge previously necessary for creating the technical side (at least) of a design job (For example preparing work for professional printing – mastering the various bookbinding , paper folding, colouring, etc options).

However the celebrated graphic designer author is still existent and someone can argue that there is a new and broad set of graphic designer's involvement in the digital world. Users are free to use graphics tools and modify web page templates or Myspace pages. But graphic designers are responsible of creating these environments for them. There is the graphic designer working with programmers, information architects to shape interfaces for the internet's users. Jobs previously done by programmers and information engineers are now in the scope of expertise of graphic designers. A new design discipline has been emerged (and many more, eg Service Design). Interaction design is a blend of graphic design and information engineering. Designers of this principle need to have a deep understanding of new digital media and their users. As Bill Moggridge of IDEO highlights, in his book "Designing interactions"(2008): **"Designers of digital technology products no longer regard their job as designing a physical object—beautiful or utilitarian—but as designing our interactions with it."** Graphic design is not the craft it used to be but new areas of knowledge are available – programming for instance. It is becoming a common phenomenon that graphic designers are engaged in a deeper level with programming code. And this is evident in design education (Interaction Design courses for example). The great involvement of graphic designers is evident in the amount of graphic design courses (and growing number of students), the increased amount of graphics periodicals, graphic design competitions, and books.

Therefore, I believe that there is a new elevated status for both reads and designers brought by the advent of the internet and new digital media. There is a more complex and mature level of visual communication. In certain ways this freedom to internet users for aesthetic expression has caused a cacophony. But is this cacophony and blend of visual polyphony a negative thing necessarily? Someone could argue that a clean Swiss International style signage system in a major airport is an objective and universal visual solution to the problem of convenient navigation through an airport or other public space. Similarly to read and navigate information through a complex news website a reader will benefit from a well thought and sophisticated information design. However the a chaotically organized myspace page or personal webpage of an anonymous internet user will not kill anybody. In a similar fashion the design of a poster for a school party from an amateurish free graphics software user might be an eyesore for an art school educated designer but the harm in society is doubtful.

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